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Articles

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Nicaragua: Somocista Influence in the FDN

The presence of troops in the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN) who served under former President Somoza has been a source of controversy—undermining the insurgents' legitimacy—since the founding of the group in 1981. For the Sandinistas, the issue has provided a propaganda opening which they have fully exploited to capitalize on widespread domestic and foreign revulsion for the Somoza dictatorship and the brutality of the National Guard during the 1979 civil war. For the FDN, the ex-Guardsmen have proved to be a difficult public relations problem, which it has attempted to overcome through successive reorganizations.

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While few troops and field commanders of the FDN served under Somoza, most of the military staff are former Guardsmen. The controversy over Somocista influence apparently has not impaired the FDN's ability to recruit new troops or to establish ties to the political opposition, although it has hindered efforts to obtain political support from foreign governments and has been a barrier to unity with Eden Pastora's insurgent group.

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The FDN's image problem is likely to linger as long as former Somoza Guardsmen dominate the organization's military leadership. Nevertheless, the FDN has made considerable progress in diminishing the perception as well as the reality of Somocista influence, and potentially can make further gains.

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FDN Troops and Field Commanders

The great majority of the FDN members in 1981 were former Guardsmen, but their relative numbers among the troops and field commanders diminished considerably over the next two years. With the entrance into FDN ranks of thousands of peasants, small landowners, and deserters from the Sandinista army and militia, the number of former Guardsmen now stands at about 2 percent of total strength.

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Despite press reports to the contrary, most of the FDN's largest combat units are not headed by National Guard veterans.

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[1] The FDN subsequently released figures: 27 Sandinistas, 16 civilians, and 13 former Guardsmen among 56 commanders.

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The General Staff

On the other hand, the FDN military staff is almost entirely composed of former Guard officers. Rebel leaders complain that these officers have been unfairly stigmatized, and that not every soldier associated with the Guard was guilty of corruption or brutality. Most staff members were low-ranking officers under Somoza, and none had close personal ties to him. We are unaware of information that would implicate any of the former Guardsmen now serving in the FDN in human rights abuses during the Somoza years.

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Efforts to cast doubt on the legitimacy of the FDN as an anti-Sandinista force have centered on former Guard Col. Enrique Bermudez, who has served as military commander of the FDN since it was founded. The international press has not, however, challenged Bermudez's integrity. In fact, the principal Sandinista army spokesman acknowledged to the press in 1982 that Bermudez had not been involved in "war crimes." In the late 1970s, one of the most professional officers in the National Guard and highly respected for his competence. An engineer, Bermudez was never active in politics but was considered personally loyal to President Somoza. He served in posts in the United States from late 1975 until the revolutionary triumph in July 1979, finishing his career as Nicaragua's defense attache.

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Efforts To Contend With the Somocista Taint

The FDN is aware that the presence of former Guardsmen is a political liability and has made several changes in its political and military leadership over the past three years to improve its image. These steps have established civilian control over the military staff and somewhat increased the organization's attractiveness.

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According to press reports, image-building was an important concern when the FDN was founded in 1981. The new organization's political junta included Jose Francisco Cardenal, a political opponent of Somoza and former vice president of the Sandinista legislature. The other junta members were political unknowns: Aristedes Sanchez, a lawyer and landowner reportedly connected to Somoza socially, and union organizer Mariano Mendoza. Some Guardsmen with unsavory reputations were purged. A Honduran military officer later told a reporter that the FDN cleaned house for a year, "getting rid of bad apples."

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New Leadership

The FDN replaced the junta with a seven-member directorate in December 1982 in an effort to build foreign and domestic support for its cause and demonstrate a broader political base. The directorate—mostly conservative political figures and businessmen, several of whom had been opponents of Somoza—was placed in charge of both political and military affairs. While this step improved the leadership's prestige, none of the new members had a popular following in Nicaragua or was well-known abroad. Two had Sandinista ties: Indalecio Rodriguez became involved with the FSLN soon after it was founded, leaving when Marxists succeeded in dominating it, and Lucia Salazar had helped shelter Sandinista fighters during the revolution.

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The FDN took an additional step toward improving its image with the announcement in January 1983 that Adolfo Calero had become a seventh member of the directorate. Calero, who had just left Nicaragua, was the head of the Democratic Conservative Party, the largest opposition party in the country. A lifelong opponent of Somoza, he had been jailed for a month

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in 1978 for initiating a general strike, along with other opposition leaders. With Calero, the FDN now had a recognized leader with strong ties to the Nicaraguan civil opposition.

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Bermudez left his position as military chief of staff to join the directorate, although he continued to serve as liaison between the leadership and the general staff. His new role indicated that the directorate would have sufficient clout to provide authoritative guidance to the military leaders. From his new position, Bermudez slightly reorganized the general staff, the primary thrust of which was the transfer of Ricardo "Chino" Lau as intelligence chief to the lower ranking post of counterintelligence chief. Lau, who had frequently been accused of human rights abuses during the revolution, was finally dismissed from the FDN in early 1984.

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Civilian Control of the Military Staff

Calero was named FDN president and commander in chief in 1983, emphasizing the subordination of the military staff to civilian authority. The FDN reorganized again in January 1984 to permit more effective civilian control by appointing the Honduran-based directorate members as an executive committee responsible for day-to-day operations. Bermudez was again named chief of the staff and is responsible for tactical planning.

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The new "civil-military command" participates in strategic planning and exercises real authority,

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It controls all finances and supervises the "strategic command" or military staff.

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Calero and Rodriguez are, in fact, treated as superiors by both officers and troops, and their opinions and authority appear to be respected throughout the military arm. There is no indication that the military staff is consulted on political strategy.

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Vague Political Program

The FDN endorses the original goals of the Sandinista revolution, but its failure to underscore its rejection of the Somoza regime probably has hindered its efforts to escape the Somocista label. The FDN has concentrated its propaganda attack on current Sandinista policy, implicitly distancing itself from Somoza by underscoring its commitment to democratic norms. The FDN's statement of principles and goals in March 1983, for example, limited itself to declaring that the Somocista dictatorship had been

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"Chino" Lau and the FDN

Former National Guard Col. Ricardo "Chino" Lau's past association with the FDN has damaged the organization's efforts to escape the "Somocista" label more than any other individual. An intelligence officer under Somoza, Lau has frequently been accused of having committed human rights abuses during the 1979 revolution. (b)(3)

The FDN removed Lau from his position as intelligence chief on the general staff in December 1982 and placed him in the less visible post of chief of counterintelligence. He was forced to leave the FDN in early 1984. It is unclear whether he was dismissed because of his reputation during the Somoza years or whether the FDN determined that he had been involved in recent abuses. We have no information to confirm press reports that Lau maintains informal contacts with FDN military leaders. (b)(3)

We also have no information to substantiate the allegation by former Salvadoran intelligence chief Santivanez that Lau was involved in the 1980 assassination of Salvadoran Archbishop Romero, and the charge appears to be disinformation intended to influence the US Congressional vote on aid to the anti-Sandinista insurgents. Similarly, press reports early this year cited the suspicions of some Honduran military officers that Lau was responsible for disappearances in Honduras. (b)(1) (b)(3)

"politically buried" in 1979. By neglecting to give the evils of the dictatorship its rhetorical due, the FDN probably has missed an opportunity to dispel doubts about the presence of former Guardsmen in its ranks. (b)(3)

The FDN's reluctance to elaborate a socioeconomic program clearly distinguishable from the oligarchical style of prerevolutionary economic policies has probably also contributed to making it suspect. Most of the FDN's 13-point program deals with political structures for guaranteeing civil liberties. The principal exceptions are the pledges to improve the agrarian reform, to implement interim economic austerity measures, including production incentives, and to return illegally seized property. FDN leaders say that there is good reason for their reluctance, since their objective is limited to restoring a democratic form of government. They explain that it is the job of political parties to define national policies through free elections, and the FDN should not involve itself in partisan debates. (b)(3)

This "disinterested" approach has not been pushed hard enough to answer critics who say that the FDN is pursuing a "vague political program." Moreover, it probably does not aid FDN efforts to attract Nicaraguans who have benefited from the revolution and may fear that the insurgents would reverse their social or economic gains. (b)(3)

On the plus side, the FDN's ability to make political alliances with other insurgent groups and the internal opposition has given it an important propaganda boost by demonstrating its acceptability to other regime opponents who had overtly opposed Somoza. Last summer, for example, the FDN joined with Miskito Indian insurgents and Alfonso Robelo's faction of the Democratic Revolutionary Alliance to form the Nicaraguan Unity for Reconciliation (UNIR). Robelo was a member of the Sandinista junta in 1979-80, and his willingness to collaborate indicates outside recognition of the FDN's successive reorganizations. In March 1985, UNIR joined a number of prominent exiled political leaders in issuing a negotiations proposal to the Sandinistas. (b)(3)

How Serious a Problem?

The Sandinistas recently increased their denunciations of the FDN as "Somocista" in order to influence the US Congressional vote on funding the insurgents and to buttress their position that dialogue with the FDN is impossible. The international press gives substantial coverage to these charges. The media is generally skeptical of FDN assertions that

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The FDN Directorate

The FDN installed a new leadership in late 1982, including known Somoza opponents, in an effort to overcome charges of Somocista influence and to build foreign and domestic support. Although the prestige of the group improved, it generally lacked leaders with a political base in Nicaragua that could have helped to dispel international concern about former National Guardsmen on the military staff. The membership on the directorate of FDN founder Enrique Bermudez indicated that the group would have sufficient authority to guide the military staff. Nevertheless, Bermudez's service in the National Guard—although unblemished—was a political liability

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the individual Guardsmen in its ranks were not associated with abuses during the Somoza years, although specific accusations have been made against few individuals. Despite the media's attention to Guard presence in the FDN's military leadership. Moreover, the press recent press reporting appears to be giving credence to the group's claims that only a tiny fraction of insurgent troops served in Somoza's military. Moreover, the press more frequently reports that the insurgents have popular support.

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The controversy over Somocista influence has had much greater impact outside Nicaragua than inside the country. Despite Sandinista propaganda, the issue does not appear to have inhibited recruitment and support in the FDN's operational areas. Some press commentary has noted that the northern departments of Nicaragua were a fertile recruiting ground for the National Guard, and therefore do not harbor the

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same degree of antipathy toward the institution as other parts of the country. Although this explanation may help account for the initial growth of the FDN, it does not explain its success in Matagalpa, Boaco, and Chontales departments—far away from the border. Nor can it account for the number of former Sandinista fighters and army personnel who have joined the FDN, many from urban areas. (b)(3)

The FDN potentially could have more of an image problem in the cities because of the strong memories of Guard excesses during the revolution. Nevertheless, (b)(1)

there is widespread awareness that the FDN is not dominated by the Guard. (b)(3)

The internal opposition does not appear to be concerned with the controversy, and the insurgents' links to the political parties have steadily increased. The opposition, for example, has repeatedly called for a "national dialogue" that would include the insurgents, most recently in March. In addition, the Catholic Church hierarchy has called several times for the government to conduct a dialogue with the insurgents, an implicit recognition of the insurgents' legitimacy (b)(3)

Internationally, the FDN has had a serious public relations problem that probably has inhibited its ability to gain political support. First, the Sandinistas have capitalized on foreign sympathy for the overthrow of Somoza, which placed any group denounced as "counterrevolutionary" at an immediate disadvantage. Sandinista propaganda is widely disseminated abroad through leadership travel and the regime's network of solidarity committees. Foreign fears probably are reinforced by reports of FDN human rights abuses—at least some of which are accurate. "Suicida," a renegade commander who the FDN tried and executed in 1983 for committing such abuses, was a National Guard sergeant. Moreover, foreigners probably are greatly influenced by Eden Pastora's opposition to joining his insurgent forces with the FDN because of the presence of former Guardsmen. Pastora, a former revolutionary hero, is the best known and most charismatic of the insurgent leaders. (b)(3)

Somocista Influence as an Obstacle to Insurgent Unity

Pastora's opposition to working with the FDN because of its Guard membership has undermined the FDN efforts to polish its image. While Pastora has demanded the removal of several key FDN military figures for political reasons, (b)(1)

his insistence that he be named the overall military commander was at least as important a reason for the failure of unity. (b)(1) (b)(3)

Moreover, FDN officials consider Pastora's criticism unjustified because some former Guardsmen are serving in his forces. (b)(1) (b)(3)

Pastora's toned-down rhetoric in recent months, his willingness to meet with FDN leaders, and statements to the press last week by his key lieutenant suggest, however, that some compromise may be possible on the unity question. Pastora's new peace initiative, which surfaced in the press in mid-May, called on the Sandinistas to conduct a dialogue with all opposition forces, including the FDN. (b)(1) (b)(3)

Outlook

The FDN probably will continue to have an image problem as long as its military command is staffed by ex-Guardsmen. A complete purge of the military staff is unlikely, not only because there is no ready substitute for its expertise, but also because it would be seen by FDN leaders as damaging to morale. Although such a move may facilitate greater international support for reconciliation talks with the regime, it would probably not change foreign

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reluctance to give the FDN political and military aid. Moreover, the Sandinistas are likely to promote the thesis that the change is cosmetic and the Guardsmen are merely "waiting in the wings." (b)(3)

Although the FDN is likely to face continued problems, it has made considerable progress in improving its image, and potentially can make further gains. The formation of UNIR has already helped to some extent, and the FDN probably could gain additional political benefits if exiled political leaders such as Cruz were directly incorporated into the organization's leadership. Moreover, FDN propaganda on the image issue appears to be improving. Statements by the unarmed opposition about ex-Guardsmen in Pastora's forces and recent charges that there are others serving in the Sandinista army appear to reflect greater efforts to mount a propaganda counterattack (b)(3)

Pastora's position on insurgent unity appears to be in flux, which could soften his allegations of Somocista influence in the FDN. The FDN undoubtedly distrusts Pastora and resents his belated attempt to grab the limelight on the unity issue, but it probably would welcome his participation in a negotiations proposal that encompasses all anti-Sandinista groups. Nevertheless, a cooperation agreement in which the two groups "agree to disagree" on the presence of former Guardsmen in the FDN leadership would be of limited usefulness for improving the organization's image, and the FDN would be unlikely to share its resources with Pastora under those circumstances.

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